

Past Arlo sometimes did future Arlo favors. In this instance, past Arlo had considered the idea that future Arlo would one day be caught with his chausses down, and had chosen a Speed evolution with that in mind. After all, this wasn't the first time that another Delver decided to surprise me with an unexpected gift of violence.

My inventory screen opened and closed so fast that it was little more than a blue flash on the edge of my vision, and my arm swept into the bracer that held Gracovus in a fraction of a second.

### **Rapid Blocks**

**You may equip or stow your shield near instantaneously. Your Speed is considered doubled for determining how quickly you can block.**

Gracovus snapped into targe mode and Tavio's fist crashed into the shield, the blow sending a shock through my entire body. The tavern was filled with a resounding *gong* like Tavio had just rung a church bell and, despite my block, pain erupted in my forearm.

**HP: 1220 -> 1184**

Tavio hit me with an empty fist, through a shield, and did *more* damage than one of the mimic's surprise attacks. But while the punch hurt, the ceiling hurt more.

Tavio struck with an uppercut, and the force of his blow launched me through the air in a diagonal up to and then *through* the twenty-foot-high ceiling above. I smashed into the timbers, the air was crushed out of my lungs, and my world was awash in splinters.

The deafening crash of snapping planks announced my uninvited entry into the second-story room of a Hiwardian couple in the throes of intimate activities, and I heard a woman's screams for a quarter second before I connected with the *next* ceiling. The boards bent and cracked, but refused to allow me through to the roof, and I bounced off, hit the wall, shattered a dresser, then tumbled to the ground.

The couple looked down at me, their cries turned to shocked silence.

## HP: 1179 -> 1128

“Apologies,” I groaned as I hopped to my feet, then ran toward the door to the room. Tavier’s strike had certainly activated my *I Don’t Attack You, You Attack Me* achievement, which would give me one second to act and plan while the Litten was stunned. Of course, most of that second had been spent on air travel. When I grabbed the doorknob, a furred arm slapped itself across the exit, and when I pulled, the handle tore from the sturdy door as Tavier kept it from opening inward.

I looked up to see the Litten staring at me with his big, black orbs, looking just as relaxed as when we’d been discussing spell restrictions over a mug of fruit juice.

“That is a good ability,” he said. “I did not expect to be stunned.” He connected across my jaw with an elbow, and my whole body spun with the speed of a figure skater going for a perfect ten. The room whirled as I found the bedroom’s western wall and I could practically hear a disembodied voice shouting “Let it rip!” as I connected like a fucking Beyblade, my torso shredding the planks.

I ended up halfway through the wall, my upper body hanging into an adjoining room where a pair of feathered Deijinon gaped at me, wide-eyed.

## HP: 1128 -> 1047

“Please forgive the intrusion,” came Tavier’s voice from behind me as I tumbled forward. “He is being difficult, I hope that you understand.”

“*I’m* being difficult?!” I shouted as I got to my feet and turned. A couple of teeth flew from my mouth when I spoke and I stared at them dumbly, momentarily struck by the loss, and by lack of blood in my mouth.

Tavier was talking to the pair of Hiwardians with arms raised in a shrug, as though he were embarrassed for me. He turned and raised an eyebrow.

“We could have done this somewhere else,” he said, then placed a hand on his hip. “That was a good block, earlier. It is an evolution, yes? Rapid Blocks. That means your Speed is at least a ten.” He walked forward and stepped through the hole I’d made as I

backpedaled, but my leg found the edge of the bed where the two Deinjenon sat frozen. “I know that your Fortitude is forty, at minimum, since you shouted to everyone in the town that you were choosing the Total Regeneration perk. At level six, you would have sixty-six stat points. Dedicating nearly two-thirds of them to Fortitude is a bold choice. I like it.”

I cast *Shortcut* and appeared behind Tavio, back inside the Hiwardians’ bedroom, then shoulder-checked the door and smashed it down. I ran out into the hall, finding several more of the inn’s guests peeking out from their rooms, disturbed by the ruckus. I needed backup for this shit, but I hadn’t paid attention to where everyone else in my party was staying. Still, the inn wasn’t that big, I just needed to-

A hand landed on my shoulder.

“Your block was quite sturdy, and you broke that door like it was nothing. That is a ten in Strength at the least, I think.”

I wheeled around and formed Gracorus into its pointed formation, driving the blunted tip toward Tavio’s wrist. He pulled the limb back with easy grace, avoiding the strike.

“That teleport is called *Shortcut*,” he said, holding one arm behind his back and studying the clawed fingers of his other. He picked at the nail of his pointer finger with his thumb, then flicked away whatever he’d dislodged. “Then you have Dimensional Magic at level ten or more, and it is not the cheapest spell, so I expect you have invested in Wisdom.” He paused and scratched at his chin. “That should be all of your points...”

I turned and looked through the window at the end of the hallway, then cast *Shortcut* to get outside. If I was going to stand any chance against this asshole, I needed more room. I couldn’t fight properly inside of an occupied building.

I popped into existence twenty-five feet off the ground, and used Gracorus to slow my descent, landing in the middle of the square. It was crowded with people, many of whom had been gawking up at the inn and they shouted in alarm when I appeared. They quickly gave me some breathing room, although several were still closer than I liked.

“Clear the area!” I shouted as I pulled out my warhammer, Arbitros. A handful sprinted off and a few more began to walk away hesitantly, but many more ignored my warning. Tavio opened the window and hopped down, landing as though he’d fallen only a couple of feet.

“You should only have enough points for two Wisdom,” said Tavio as he strolled forward. “Which would mean you are out of mana. Tell me, how would you do a platinum Delve

with such low offensive stats? Do you simply let the enemy strike at you while your party deals all the damage?”

I considered pulling out a throwing hammer, but didn't like the collateral damage that might cause. If Tavio dodged, the projectile would smash through a good chunk of the inn behind him before halting, whether or not I used *Homing Weapon* to bring the hammer back. I had no idea how many people that might maim or kill. *Explosion!* was equally useless with so many people around. The radius was too big, even without charging it.

That left me with a handful of shitty melee options against a melee fighter who was clearly beyond me. He was using his bare fucking hands and two hits had chunked away fifteen percent of my health.

Tavio dashed forward, his body bursting with glorious light. He was on me in an instant, the world exploded in a flash, and I was airborne again.

**You have taken Righteous damage! Sumrann has judged you worthy, and no bonus damage has been dealt.**

The notification was of little solace as my health took another decent hit.

**HP: 1047 -> 996**

[*You should be more concerned with your own survival than the inconsequential lives of the plebeians around you!*] came Grotto's voice in my mind as I soared through the air and smashed through the front of a haberdashery on the opposite side of the square. [*The discomfort this is causing me is substantial!*] The store was closed for the evening, so no one was inside, but suits and dress wear tumbled down on top of me as several shelves collapsed.

[Not my style, Grotto,] I thought as I extricated myself from the fashionable attire. Tavio was already in front of me.

I'd kept my grip on Arbitros and swung it at him, but the fucker *punched* my hammer. His fist struck the head of the weapon and knocked it away with enough force to nearly

tear it from my grasp. Tavio followed up with a left hook that sent me through the southern wall of the shop and back out into the street.

Shards of glass and wood were stuck in my hair and beard, and I spat out another tooth. By this point, most of the onlookers were fleeing in earnest, shouting or screaming in alarm.

**HP: 996 -> 925**

*[Then summon Shog'tuatha for assistance! I am sure that the brute would be more than willing to consume this insufferable rat.]*

[You want me to summon a c'thon in the middle of a crowded Hiwardian city?]

*[As your summon, he must obey you. He will not harm these people! To deny yourself his aid is giving greater weight to their emotional comfort than your own life. Don't be a fool!]*

I clenched my teeth, painfully aware of the ragged gums where three of them had been smashed out. Grotto was right, I couldn't worry over what the people around me *thought* about a c'thon rampaging through their town, so long as it wasn't eating people along the way.

I cast *Dimensional Summon*, a gaping tear opened in reality. Tendrils snaked out of it, covered in multicolored feathers. Tavio paused his slow advance through the fresh door he'd carved with my body to study the spell as I clambored to my feet.

[Move the Closet entrance to the pound. I'm going to try and take this fight somewhere safer.]

[*Safer for you,*] Grotto thought with sinister glee, [*much less safe for him.*]

"That is Dimensional Summon!" Tavio said, looking surprised. "It is quite expensive. Have I mistaken your stat distribution? Or..."

A demonic voice purred, interrupting Tavio.

***"It is good to hear your call once more, slayer of Ihbriobrixilas."***

Shog'tuatha emerged from the portal, eight feet of impossibly lean c'thonic muscle, covered in pulsing veins beneath boreal skin. Downy tentacles spilled down the front of his face from his cephalopod head like a nightmarish beard, but the tentacles were no longer uniform.

After nearly being consumed by Orexis, I had dismissed Shog back to his home dimension sporting vicious wounds that cut all the way down to his dark bones. Many of his original tentacles had been lost, but Shog had picked up a few new tricks after eating a part of the specter.

A wounded c'thon is food, according to Shog, and that seemed to be the prevailing opinion on his homeworld. When he was dismissed, he was set upon by a mountain of foes seeking to finish the job that Orexis had started, but Shog had slaughtered them endlessly. After tapping into Orexis' soul, he'd learned how to bond with the essence of his victims, and had taken to claiming tentacles from those he slew as trophies, and as replacements.

Shog's beard was now an amalgamation of feelers, varying in length, color, and girth. One swayed through the air, covered in chitinous barbs that clacked and clattered, another glowed with spectral luminescence, and a third dripped venomous ichor. There were many more interspersed between the remaining black and green tendrils that were his originals, and the ones that came stock flexed with monstrous strength.

"It is grade ten!" shouted Tavio. "How do you summon something so strong?"

I narrowed my eyes at Tavio. The jackass had started a fight I didn't want, and even though he fought me without armaments, I had no guarantee that he was trying to let me live. For all I knew, he was ordered to exact revenge over the death of Sayil, regardless of whether he believed Varrin, Xim, or I had contributed to the Littan's death.

When someone attacked me without warning my default assumption was that it was with lethal intent. Beyond that, Tavio had somehow managed to keep from punching me through any *people* while he slugged me through *walls*, but I had no idea how long that pattern would last. Someone was going to die.

"Shog," I said, "hungry?"

**"Always."**

Shog didn't need anything more. The c'thon shot through the air at Tavio, and the Littan was taken by surprise when one of the summon's tentacles shimmered with a blaze of mana, firing a paralyzing arc of power at the man.

Tavio stepped to the side and narrowly avoided the beam, but Shog brought several feelers down on the Littan. Tavio struck at the tentacles as they assaulted him, his fists landing with meaty thunks. Shog's feelers were shunted away with each blow, and I could already see violet c'thon blood beginning to dribble onto the ground.

Still, Tavio had only two hands, and Shog's feelers were endless. The c'thon got a pair wrapped around Tavio's waist and began stabbing the Littan with a venomous stinger. Tavio's expression finally moved from calm surprise, to irritation.

"Detestable creature!" Tavio spat, then connected with a glowing fist in Shog's face. There was a burst of radiant light like I'd seen when the Littan charged me, and Shog let out an inhuman howl. Rather than releasing the Littan, however, the c'thon was enraged.

I moved in as Shog began to flail at his grappled foe with increased ferocity and used *Nimean Weapon* to layer *Oblivion Orb* onto my hammer swing. I went for Tavio's center mass, trying to angle my strike away from Shog's feelers, and not trusting myself enough for a head blow.

Tavio continued to punch Shog's feelers away, and a few of them were little more than pulp by this point, raining monstrous blood onto the ground. The Littan twisted his body, wrenching himself free of Shog's grip, and struck the head of my warhammer again. His strike landed on its side, and *Oblivion Orb* failed to activate.

The weapon *shattered*.

The hammer's head scattered into a hundred pieces that shot down the street like a shotgun blast. They shredded through the exterior of a bakery across from us, furniture and display cases exploding from the force. Tavio tore a tentacle from Shog's face, then landed a kick to the c'thon's center that sent him flying away. Shog caught himself in the air before crashing into a building, using his c'thonic flight to stabilize himself.

Tavio turned and scowled at me.

"You work with such a beast?" he snarled. "I had a better impression of you than that."

[*The Closet entrance has been moved.*]

I dropped the handle of my broken weapon onto the ground, then detached Gracorvus, sending it into hover mode. I began to focus on opening the Closet, mana-shaping the ability.

"Shog," I said, and the c'thon growled in response. "Taking this guy on a trip."

Shog roared and blasted toward Tavio as I cast *Shortcut* to appear behind him. At the same time, I commanded Gracorvus to fly at the Littan, creating a three-point assault.

Tavio spun and punched Gracorvus away, the shield scattering into its individual slabs. They spun in the air, trying to reform as I thrust my palm at Tavio's side, pumping mana into an *Oblivion Orb*. The Littan caught my wrist and twisted. I felt bones snap as Tavio leaned into the move. There was a resounding *pop* as the spell activated, but without contacting my target. Tavio's lock brought me to the ground, and I face-planted into the dirt roadway, made muddy by Shog's blood. The acrid scent of it filled my nostrils.

Amidst the fray, the Closet opened, and Tavio had busied himself avoiding my two-pronged attack. Shog barreled into the Littan, wrapping him up and pushing him toward the Closet entrance.

Tavio's feet dug into the ground, dirt piling beneath the soles of his boots as they dug deep into the road. I cast *Shortcut* again, appearing beside Tavio and I kicked at his knee. The Littan bent his leg inward in response, my foot meeting the front of his kneecap, but the move cost him leverage against Shog's charge.

He stumbled off balance and Shog carried him through the portal and into the Closet.